

Ottomans and the Printing Press: Answering Misconceptions

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The time lag of almost three centuries which elapsed between Gutenberg's setting up his press and Müteferrika's publishing his first book *Van Kulu* has been interpreted in various ways by contemporary historians, which resulted in the common belief that this was one of the main reasons for the Ottoman State's backwardness.

The description of Müteferrika's printing press as it reached our time has become a *galat-i-meşhur* (common mistaken belief) as is the case with many other subjects of Ottoman history. For our contemporaries who have not examined it thoroughly, this printing house is known as "the first Turkish printing press, activated in 1729 after a *fetva* (religious authorization) was obtained on the condition that it would not print religious books." In our opinion, virtually all the constituents of this description are deficient, as explained below:

1. Its description as "the first Turkish printing press" needs to be considered and corrected. What is meant by "Turkish printing press"? If it is meant to indicate this was the first printing press to be

established in Ottoman lands, it is wrong, as others were set up and operated in those lands much earlier, starting from the 1480s. If this description is used in relation with founder, it is again incorrect, as Ibrahim Müteferrika was a convert of Hungarian origin and a civil servant of the Ottoman State. The adjective “Turkish” is not appropriate either as regards the publications and their languages, as it is known that Turkish, Arabic and Persian books were printed in Europe before Müteferrika set up his press. In view of the above, the expression “the first Turkish printing press” needs to be corrected. No doubt, the printing press set up by Müteferrika was a “first.” The following description would correctly explain in what respect it was so: “The first printing house to be set up under the patronage and with the support of a Muslim State (the Ottoman State) in its lands with the aim of printing the books belonging to and needed for the culture of that state.”

2. In our opinion, the date 1729 is not mentioned in its correct context either. This is the date of publication of Van Kulu Lugatı which is accepted to be the first book printed by the Müteferrika Matbaası; in other words, it refers to the completion of the printing of that work's two volumes. Obviously, the establishment of the printing press was much

earlier. Even regardless of the work Vesilet'ut-Tibba, and the maps which were printed some ten years before Van Kulu, this date has to be taken back by several years to accommodate for the technical and mechanical preparations that must have been completed before printing Van Kulu. Therefore, 1729 is not the establishment date of the press, but the date of the completion of the printing of its first book the Van Kulu Lugatı.

3. "A fetva issued on condition that it would not print religious books" is another mistake frequently repeated. The emphasis of the fetva was that the books to be printed ought to be authentic and without mistakes. A preference was expressed for those belonging to the "ulum-i-âliyye", i.e. textbooks, while no statement of prohibition was there whatsoever. It is observed that despite this many authors of the present century have repeated this unfounded opinion without, feeling the need to verify it. A deeper inquiry into the subject shows us how this opinion was formed. A hatt-i-hümayun (imperial order), or emir-i-şerif-i âli-şân as the document is titled, has the mention not of "religious sciences" but " ... books on sciences other than fıkıh (jurisprudence), kelam (Qur'anic theology), tefsir (exegesis) and hadis (sayings of the Prophet) will be printed ...", which can be considered as a limitation

or prohibition. This means that if there is any prohibition, it was stipulated not by the fetva but the imperial order. Thus, the reasons which shaped common opinion, have to be examined. In our opinion, those reasons suggest that it would be more appropriate to speak of a limitation instead of a prohibition. It would be useful to point out, as regards the correction of the mistake, the differences between a fetva and a hatt-i-humayun. A fetva is an opinion which issued by a müftü (religious authority) on a particular subject or in answer to a question, on the basis of the fundamental religious sources of reference. In today's terms, it would correspond to a legal verdict pronounced by a judicial authority on the basis of the applicable legislation. As to the hatt-i-humayun, it is a decision issued by the political and executive authority. Though in theory, such a decision is expected to be in conformity with the religious opinion, there are many examples showing that in practice, application of the former often depended upon other decisions and conditions that were then in effect. Why was such a limitation imposed upon Müteferrika's printing house? This question can best be answered not by commonplace labels and simplistic arguments such as bigotry or backwardness, but by taking into consideration the

characteristics and circumstances of the time and in the light of sources and documents.

Having pointed out these three elements of the above incorrect description, it would be appropriate to mention some other aspects of the printing press which are not known well enough and which, when explained, will help in understanding the nature of this printing press much better.

The first point is, why was the establishment of our printing press delayed until Müteferrika's taking the initiative? Given that the circles concerned were no doubt aware of the technique starting from the period of Sultan Bayezit II, wasn't there any effort, since then, to set up printing and book production facilities? Clear evidence to the effect that the matter was considered earlier is found in the work titled Vesilet'ut-Tibba: though the possibility of applying the technique in the country was deliberated upon by Ministers, the needed skilled manpower was not found, given that "this is a difficult and painstaking work."

It is understood from the above statement that the state did take into consideration the possibility that this technology already used by minorities be used by Muslims too to meet their own needs, but wasn't able to produce the skilled manpower needed to apply the technique which was found to be difficult and painstaking. The difficulty and pain involved must have

been of technical nature only, and once Müteferrika undertook the task, or was helped to do so, i.e. when somebody who would take charge of its technical aspects was there to do it, the press was set up.

It would be useful, at this juncture, to briefly evoke, with an example, the fanatical movements that are often mentioned in connection with this press. The famous Kabakçı revolt is actually usually described as a manifestation of fanaticism which put an end to the Tulip Age. This movement, which caused many heads to be cut off, did not even take note of Müteferrika and his press.

Another point which has not been clarified enough in studies conducted until now is the role Müteferrika played in this activity. Although Müteferrika is qualified in the sources as “basmacı” (printer), in our opinion he was more than that: a publisher. Vesilet’ut-Tibba is not only a document expressing the need to set up a printing press, but it can also be considered as a publication program. The document depicts the subject areas in which the publications were needed in order to diffuse knowledge to the people and thus help the modernization of the Ottoman State. An examination of these subject areas helps to better understand the mention of technical books contained in the fetva, while the document confirms that Müteferrika was both a printer and a publisher.

Was Ibrahim Müteferrika only a printer and a publisher? Taking into consideration the maps and the books he printed and the works he wrote, he was also a distinguished intellectual of the Ottoman State from the millet-i islamiyye (Muslim millet, or nation). Müteferrika, who appeared to be a true intellectual fully conscious of the circumstances and requirements of his time and endowed with a sound knowledge and culture, was one of the representative figures of “the Ottoman identity” who deserve to be studied by researchers interested in defining it.

It is also necessary to examine in detail the role and contributions of Said Efendi in this enterprise. Was his contribution only a privilege extended to the job, and was such a privilege necessary, or did he go as far as helping the publishing activity itself?

Another subject which has not been studied thoroughly until now is, how were the books printed by Müteferrika received? The answer to this would also throw more light on the reasons for the delay in establishing the press after Gutenber. The following example is significant in this regard: Şair Nedim, a famous poet and intellectual contemporary to Müteferrika, who was as close to the Palace as Müteferrika was, and known for his interest in scholarship and learning, would be expected to have shown an attention to the printing press and its activities.

However, surprisingly enough, Nedim's collection of poems does not contain any mention of it. An indication as to the reasons for this inattention would also help to explain the reasons for the above-mentioned delay in the establishment of the press.

Neglecting to seriously examine the reasons for this delay and citing the latter as one of the reasons for the country's "backwardness"- whatever that might mean in this context- is another common, frequent mistake. Some reasons were stated by authors who wrote on this subject. The correct way to investigate the reasons for the delay would be to try to determine Ottoman learned circles' need for books, the ways of supply and characteristic of these books. Let us try to find out along these lines:

It would not be correct, in our opinion, to claim that Ottoman learned circles faced difficulties in procuring the books they needed. Books were produced at any period and in all areas by way of authorship, compilation and translation. This is confirmed by subject-wise analysis of collections contained in our libraries and their catalogues. Adding to this the fact that the available books were multiplied by means of copying, one can state safely that the production and the supply of books were carried on as uninterrupted activities. Various notes recorded on copies of books indicate that books were not only

produced but were also circulated regularly. We can conclude that the Ottoman intellectuals and learned circles did not face any shortage of books; on the contrary, the latter were always rather readily available to them.[1]

As was pointed out earlier by some authors, another reason for the delay was related to the esthetical characteristics of books. Manuscript books other than technical books prepared for students were generally produced with special care. With the quality of paper, the beauty of the calligraphy, the gilding and binding, they reflect an esthetical concern. It was not possible, at least then, to find the same esthetical features in printed books. As long as one could afford it, one would opt for the manuscript book.

In this connection, the teaching methods of the time acquire relevance as well. By examining available copies of books, some notes written in them, and some libraries' establishment deeds, we can see that medrese students used to start a course first by copying the related book for their own use. It is stated in some of the deeds of libraries that on certain days of the week, the library would be opened exclusively to students, and for copying purposes. This also explains why some copies of books are abundant and their handwriting is irregular. The medrese student, who was the potential buyer of a book was, instead,

producing his own copy of the book by his own labour, using paper and ink that he generally obtained through assistance, and this was also a way for him to be initiated to the subjects he would later study with the teacher. In such a situation, there would not be any demand for printing works by medrese students at least.

This brings us to the main reason for the delay in introducing the technique to the country, which is related to demand and supply conditions. Ottoman learned people always had access to the literature they needed. While books became abundant due to the copying activity described above, bookshops were always there to serve the needs, as the latter were not only trading places, but also production places for books. Booksellers used to maintain stocks of copies matching potential demand, and were also able to meet arising needs upon order by getting books copied by the thousands of copyists, calligraphers, etc. who worked in his field. The process was not one of creating demand for the available supply, but matching the supply with the demand, which was the case not only in the book production sector, but also in other sectors of life in the Ottoman State. There are many areas in which the capitalistic way of generating demand to buy the supply did not correspond to the way Ottoman economy was run, where needs felt were translated into a demand that would generate a supply. In this respect,

the Ottoman's establishing the printing press three centuries later than Gutenberg can be considered as one of the manifestation of this approach or practice, in addition to its resulting from a combination of several factors, still needing to be studied as stated above.

— Hidayat Y. Nuhoglu, 'Müteferrika's Printing Press: Some Observations', in: Kemal Çiçek (ed.), The Great Ottoman-Turkish Civilisation. Volume 3 (Ankara, 2000) pp. 85-88

Addendum:

"Most Western scholars find fault with Muslims on their late acceptance of printing press completely overlooking the fact that at least some of this reluctance was connected with aesthetics as well as economic considerations. A tradition that had flourished for centuries and had been responsible for the emergence of several related trades and crafts, such as calligraphy, book binding, ink production and that was supporting longstanding family traditions devoted to the art of book publishing, could not be replaced overnight. No one ever mentions these reasons;" — Muzaffar Iqbal, Islam and Science: Explorations in the fundamental questions of the Islam and science discourse, (Lahore, 2004) p.161 n.85
Notes: [1] This was true for Muslim Subcontinent as well. Syed Manazir Ahsen Gilani in his wonderful work "Hindustan mein Musalmanon ka Nizam-i-Talim wa

Tarbiyyat” (Muslim Education System in the Indian Subcontinent) has dedicated many pages to the issue of availability of books and the means for it. Interestingly, he also related his findings to the issue of Muslim reception of the printing press. We owe our readers translation of the said pages. We shall link it here, in-sha’Allah! .

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